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SUMMARY

Home gardeners willing to take on a bit of extra work can select from an enormous number of flavorful and desirable tomato varieties, many only available as seeds. For best results, select disease-resistant varieties suitable for your climate and growing conditions, start the seeds according to when you want to transplant outdoors, and rotate your crop's location from year to year.

Starting Tomatoes from Seed

by Terry Lippert, UC Master Gardener

Starting your own tomatoes from seed provides more varietal options.

Q: In past years I've purchased tomato seedlings for my garden. This year I'd like to grow my own. What should I do to be successful?

A: Plan to start the tomato seedlings indoors about eight weeks before the date you want to transplant them to the garden. In Central Contra Costa County, May 1 is a good target date for transplanting outdoors, so you should start seeds by March 1.

Many Varieties Available:

Starting tomato seedlings at home allows you to pick from an enormous number of flavorful varieties, many of which are available only to home gardeners. For best success, choose varieties that are suitable for your climate and growing conditions.

Tomatoes are a warm-season crop, but varieties adapted to cooler temperatures or shorter growing seasons are also available. The University of California publication *Growing Tomatoes in the Home Garden* lists varieties that are

suitable for different climate conditions prevalent in our area. You can download this publication at:

<https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8159.pdf>

Tomatoes are described as determinate or indeterminate, depending on the plant's growth pattern. Indeterminate varieties produce vines that continue to grow and produce fruit until killed by frost or disease. Determinate varieties grow to a set height—usually about 3 to 5 feet—and produce all their fruit in a four to six week period. The relatively compact growth of determinate varieties makes them a good choice for growing in containers.

Consider Resistant Varieties:

Particularly if you have had past problems with tomato diseases, you may want to select a hybrid variety with resistance to common tomato problems such as verticillium wilt, fusarium wilt and nematodes. Seed packets indicate resistance to these diseases with the initials VFN. The UC publication

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mentioned above also identifies disease resistant varieties. But, "resistance" is not equivalent to immunity. To help curb disease, use crop rotation and avoid planting tomatoes or other members of the nightshade (Solanaceae) family, which includes peppers, eggplant, and potatoes, in the same location in consecutive years.

Starting Your Seeds:

Seeds are available from seed catalogs, nurseries and home supply stores and can be started in many types of containers. To reduce costs, you can use the bottoms of milk cartons, paper cups or small plastic containers. Punch holes in the bottom for drainage.

Sow seeds in a sterile seed mix. You can buy potting mix or make your own by combining equal parts of horticultural vermiculite, perlite and sphagnum moss. Plant two or three seeds about ¼ inch deep in each container, water lightly and cover the containers with plastic to keep the potting mixture damp. Put the containers in a warm location. Ideal germination temperature is 70°-90°Fahrenheit.

Caring for Your Seedlings:

After six to fourteen days, plants

should emerge and you can remove the plastic covers. Move the containers to a cooler, brighter spot—for example, to a window sill where daytime temperatures are 60°-70° Fahrenheit. Allow potting mixture to dry on the surface between waterings but don't allow plants to wilt. Once true leaves appear, thin the seedlings to one plant per container by snipping off weaker seedlings. Fertilize every 10 to 14 days using a diluted liquid fertilizer.

Prepare for Transplanting:

About ten days before transplanting seedlings to the garden, harden the plants off by moving them to a protected outdoor area, gradually increasing the exposure to sunlight each day. Bring plants inside at night for the first week or if frost is expected. After hardening off, seedlings can be transplanted to a sunny site in the prepared garden bed or container.

For More Information:

For more cultural tips on growing tomatoes and dealing with common pests and diseases, see:

<http://www.ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/VEGES/tomato.html> .